



*"Record Protection in
an Uncertain World"*

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PRESERVATION AND STORAGE OF MATERIALS OTHER THAN PAPER

Part I

Phono-discs, Phono-Tapes

Preservation of the Human Heritage through Sound Recordings and Motion Pictures

By

Edward E. Colby, M.A.

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The World Conference on Records is an event of incalculable significance for the world of scholarship because it indicates a deep concern that the records of human thought and action shall be preserved for future generations. Whether or not there will be future generations to read and hear these records may be somewhat problematical, but for teachers and librarians the everyday acts of studying, teaching, acquiring documents and cataloging them are de facto expressions of faith in the future, and unless one is hypocritical, it is most difficult to be a pessimist while preparing the next generation for a richer intellectual and spiritual life.

The present conference has further significance in its recognition of the importance of non-book materials, such as disc and tape recordings and motion picture films and pictures. This fourth type of document is to be discussed By Dr. Walter S. Dunn, Jr. The inclusion of these non-book categories is especially reassuring because the importance of non-book materials is by no means universally acknowledged even among librarians, and a good deal of pioneering in a wilderness of apathy and opposition is unfortunately still necessary. The dicta of Marshall McLuhan, while serving to call attention to the influence of radio, television and the motion picture, has paradoxically not served to confirm the importance of preserving the content of these three media, since their characteristic impact is supposedly mementary rather than cumulative in nature, and accordingly it held to be not important that a major part of the content remain with the individual.

In spite of certain negative attitudes of the past and present, the importance of preserving the human heritage through auditory and visual records has long been recognized by scholars. The recording of folk music, with the specific intention of preserving it, goes back at least to the beginning of the century. Some of the earliest motion pictures were re-creations of historical events, and of these films some have been preserved. Institutions dedicated to the preservation of sound recordings have long existed in Germany, Italy and France, and more recently have been established in England and the United States. The Preliminary Directory of

Sound Recordings Collections in the United States and Canada, published in 1967, lists approximately 1700 private and institutional collections whose holdings reflect a wide variety of fields of music and speech. Film archives exist in Germany - both East and West - and in England and France as well as the United States. Encouraging, too, is the recent establishment of the Federation Internationale des Phonothèques and the Association of Recorded Sound Collections.

To list some of the factors which make sound recordings an essential part of the human record is not to underestimate the value of the written and printed word. In the hands of intelligent and skilful writers, words can convey an astonishingly wide spectrum of auditory and visual impressions. But there are certain qualities in sound which are not transferable. In the field of music the basic non-transferable factor is the uniqueness of any given performance. A performance may not depend on written symbols at all, as in the case of improvisation or of folk music, whose pitches and rhythmic patterns are not adaptable to conventional notation. Or a performance may depend only partly on written or printed notation - this is true of much music of the Baroque period (1660-1750) and of contemporary popular music.

Even music that is completely and exactly notated by the composer undergoes changes in the hands of different conductors and performers, and of the same conductors and performers on different occasions. The extremes of freedom and control - aleatory or chance music and computer-generated music - rely on sound recordings for their preservation, although a computer program may serve as a "score" for the latter. Sound recordings are of particular value in documenting techniques in singing and playing which have been popular in the past, but are no longer so, and with our perspective of over 70 years in the history of sound recordings we find ourselves in a position where we may write a history of performance styles using discs and tapes as primary source materials.

Special attention should be called to musical instruments as "documents". In the absence of written notation and sound recordings, or to confirm the accuracy of these media, it may be necessary to determine by acoustic measurement and by consideration of the properties of the structural materials whether a given instrument is capable of producing the sound ascribed to it. In the case of the music of Ancient Egypt, for example, we are almost entirely dependent on remnants of the musical instruments found in archeological excavations. There is an interesting re-creation available on tape originally made under the sponsorship of UNESCO, of what the music of Ancient Egypt may have been, based on the capabilities of the instruments of that culture.

The field of human speech offers a parallel instance of the importance of documentation by sound recording. There may exist human sounds which are not, or can not be represented by written symbols, if not among primitive tribes, then perhaps as examples of glossolalia. There are also instances of languages whose sounds are only partly, or incorrectly represented by written symbols. Even those languages which are phonetically quite faithful to their spelling, such as Spanish, are subject to regional variations. All of these variations, in any language, should be preserved. It is conceivable that in recordings of "chance" speech, such as

that heard on a busy street corner, we may have a remote counterpart to "chance" music. There is also tape-generated and computer-generated speech, in which speech sounds are synthesized. Regional speech patterns, which are in many cases being destroyed by widespread public communications and by increased mobility, must certainly be captured by sound recordings. For genealogists family and personal speech habits are of interest.

Motion pictures and videotapes are of particular importance, of course, for those arts which are dependent on sight as well as sound for their effect. Drama, opera, ballet, and other media in which facial expressions and bodily gestures are important must be recorded both aurally and visually. With the rapid changes taking place in urban and rural landscapes, and in the modes of everyday life, we need motion pictures as well as still photographs to give us some impression of the nature and tempo of life a year ago, five years ago, a decade ago. How many motion pictures do we have of life in Salt Lake City 40 years ago?

How are these documents to be preserved? Fortunately, there exists studies for both sound recordings and motion picture films, which are listed in the bibliography. Temperature, humidity, pressure, and protection from breakage, wear, mold, vandalism, fire, earthquakes and war must be taken into account. There is also the more subtle danger with tape recordings of loss of fidelity through disappearance of high and low frequencies, or because of printthrough. There is the further question of fidelity of the originals, or the higher "fidelity" of tape copies, in the case of historical disc recordings. The originals certainly should be preserved, and duplicates made for playback, such as microfilms, Xerox copies and reprints are used for general circulation instead of rare manuscripts and rare books.

Musical instruments are subject to breakage and must be protected further by temperature and humidity control. There is the added problem of keeping musical instruments in shape by continued use.

Parameters for the storage of films are set forth in the books and the article listed in the bibliography. In the rare instances where films with nitrate base are still found, they should be transferred to safety film, since the nitrate variety is highly inflammable.

Having discussed the value of preserving non-book materials, and having referred to means of preservation, we may consider the second meaning of the title of this paper: "Preservation of the Human Heritage through Sound Recordings and Motion Pictures."

If we are to preserve the record of human thought and activity in written and printed form and in sound and pictures, we are presumably preserving it for other humans, or the terrestrial survivors of a world-wide catastrophe or for the extra-terrestrial archeologists of some future interplanetary age. But it is rather unlikely that there would be many survivors of a world-wide disaster. It is to be hoped that there may be some agreement, even among hostile governments, that continuity of the human species is preferable to extinction. So I should like to turn our attention to the possible effectiveness of sound and film in finding our way out of the present darkness and solving our problems peacefully. From the point of view of a member

of a democratic society, the solution appears to lie in increasing the channels of communication to provide for a greater knowledge of history, open discussion and the ability to criticize intelligently.

Such subjects as the relation of oral tradition to democracy, the participation of women in the democratic process, the importance of the "phone-in" radio and television program should be carefully investigated, and studies should be made to gain some ideas about the directions in which we are moving. In conclusion I should like to emphasize that while we are preparing for preservation of recordings and films under the most adverse conditions, we should also use sound recordings and films as agents which will bring conflicting elements of our society together in constructive dialog. These media should be used also as stimulants to learning, on a much broader scale than they are now employed. There is a frightening gap between the knowledge explosion on the one hand and the overwhelming social problems born of ignorance on the other. All the resources of the human mind and its technology should be used in overcoming this danger.

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